

Freedom fighters or terrorists

BAYARD RUSTIN

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The PLO:

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By BAYARD RUSTIN

Editor's note: Bayard Rustin, executive director of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, in the following column, discusses the distortion of language that occurs when terrorism is described as "liberation" and cited the surrender of "political and humanitarian principles" implicit in the UN's recognition of Yasir Arafat and the PLO.

One of the most distressing reflections of the unhappy state of world politics is the ease with which words can be perverted, stripped of significance, and made to mean their opposite.

Acts of murder and terrorism are transformed into gestures of "liberation." Hijacking and slaughter of innocent children are carried out in the name of "peace." The word "racism," once so meaningful to the oppressed of the world, has lost all objective value as it is often applied to democratic, interracial societies as to those which practice the most extreme forms of apartheid.

The distortion of language is, however, but a symbol of a fundamental surrendering of political and humanitarian principles, typified most dramatically by the warm reception accorded Mr. Yassir Arafat and the Palestinian Liberation Organization by the United Nations. For Mr. Arafat to have shot his way into the General Assembly with a machine gun, only to be greeted

by an overture of applause, would have been almost as ridiculous - and deplorable - as the cheers which greeted his trade of misrepresentation.

What is, after all, the "legitimate struggle" Mr. Arafat and the PLO are conducting. It is a struggle being waged with the tactics of calculated violence, where military targets are avoided, but women, children, athletes, diplomats, airline passengers - the defenseless and uninvolved - are sought and struck down.

By embracing the PLO, the U.N. Has given a solemn amen to organized brutality, encouraging along the way no one knows how many other extremist organizations with a grudge against society.

It should be noted that the PLO's terrorism is practiced on dissidents within the Palestinian community as well as on Israelis and their supporters. Arafat likes to talk of the PLO goal of establishing a "democratic" state, but here again we must distinguish between a word's actual meaning and Arafat's definition. The PLO is certainly no model of democracy; no one elected Arafat to represent the Palestinians; its authority is guaranteed by the "freedom fighter's gun" to which Mr. Arafat referred at the U.N.



What, then, of the PLO's charge that Israel is a "racist" nation. This accusation has been repeated so often - Arafat made numerous references to Israeli "racism" and "colonialism" in his U.N. Address - that it has achieved a measure of acceptance worldwide, and in the American black community.

The question is what do the Arabs mean by "racism?" The standard definition is the systematic oppression of an ethnic or racial minority, very often justified on the grounds that the minority is inherently less intelligent, less clean, less pure or in some way inferior to the majority.

Applying this measurement, it is apparent that some of the most blatant "racist" regimes are in Arab lands. In Iraq, Jews were hanged in a public square, while today napalm is employed the dissident Kurdish minority. Syria rivals Nazi Germany in its brutal treatment of its Jewish citizens, who are confined to a cramped quarter of Damascus, prevented from emigrating, and from time to time murdered with official sanction. And in the Sudan, it was non-Moslem blacks who were the target of a genocidal war in which 500,000 were killed and many thousands more forced to flee their homes.

I would not pretend that the racial situation in Israel, where some 400,000 Arabs live as citizens, is perfect. But given the enormous problems confronting her, this small nation has achieved a level of racial tolerance that is indeed remarkable. The Arabs within Israel enjoy rights and standard of living unknown to the masses in Moslem nations. They participate politically; elect their own representatives to parliament; receive public education; and belong to Histadrut, the Israeli labor federation. They are, in other words, a part of progressive institutions of Israeli society.

I believe that the Palestinian people have the right to a homeland, to self-determination, to the resolution of their state of uncertainty. The Jewish people, historically an oppressed people, have the same right. And given the rhetoric and actions of the PLO, there can be little doubt that to accede to the demand of a bi-national state would result in the Jews of Israel being dealt with much like the Jews in Iraq and Syria.

In her brief history, Israel has forged an enviable record of social achievement. At a time when so many appear willing to accept lies as the truth, to reach dishonest conciliation with terrorists, to barter away the most basic ideals of justice and compassion, Israel more than ever deserves the support of people of good will and common decency.